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ABSTRACT

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TALKING ABOUT LEARNING

A Discussion of Two Cultural Themes For Academic Activity Within a Women's Residence Hall

by

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National Association of Student Personnel Administrators
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INTRODUCTION

Conversations with and among students in their residential environment illuminate the role of peer subcultures in shaping what students learn and how they define learning. This excerpt from a year-long ethnographic case study examines the ways in which residents of an undergraduate women's residential unit talk about academic activity. It illustrates how female students talk about learning and speculates about the interaction between that talk and their curricular experiences.

Two themes which have emerged from the data are highlighted:

(1) A shared sense of personal cost-benefit analysis by which women residents set limits on the expenditure of time and energy for academic pursuits; and

(2) Taboos which constrain conversations with co-residents about intellectual topics or curricular content.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student affairs administrators have long been charged with developing and supporting "living-learning" (Riker, 1965; Rowe, 1981) environments on campus (ACPA, 1974; Brown, 1972; Miller & Prince, 1976). Thus they are always hungry for documentary evidence of how residential programs function, how students create and shape communities, and how those programs and communities relate to students' academic performance. The literature is divided between broadly speculative, philosophical treatises on the purpose of residence halls and tightly limited statistical analyses of correlations between

milieu variables and objective measures of achievement. Taken in the aggregate, the literature offers widespread consensus about what residence halls should be contributing to student academic achievement but inconclusive evidence about what, in fact, they do contribute. Blimling (1989) conducted a meta-analysis of 2,000 campus living impact studies and concluded that residence halls have not been shown to "exert a major influence on students' academic performance."

Whether the literature substantiates that the "living-learning" approach functions in practice remains an arguable point. Nevertheless, administrators of campus residential programs possess a crucial need to know what's happening within the context of their campuses, to identify concepts which illuminate the relationships between student living environment and student academic performance, and to understand the characteristics of the residential culture as perceived by its members (Kuh & Andreas, 1991; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991). "To improve higher-education management we must understand colleges and universities as socially constructed organizations .... This cannot be done through armchair research but only through intimate contact with daily institutional life..." (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988, p. 13). This study strives to contribute to such understanding by exploring the lived culture of one women's residential unit with, it is to be hoped, "the richness of in-depth description that formed the basis of the first student development theories" (Stage, 1990, p. 60).

RESEARCH QUESTION

My study addresses the research question, What are the cultural themes for academic activity within the culture of a selected women's residential unit at a state comprehensive university? To further explicate the question three terms must be defined:

> **Culture**: "The acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior" (Spradley, 1980, p. 6);
>
> **Cultural Theme**: any recurrent principle which serves "as a relationship among subsystems of cultural meaning" (Spradley, 1980, p. 141); and
>
> **Academic Activity**: observed or reported behaviors, engaged in or reported by the residents, which pertain to the residents' academic programs, program content, academic performance, or related intellectual interests.

The research question is a formal way of asking, what is it like for a group of women to live on campus in the 1990's and how, if at all, do they experience the interaction of living and learning in college? I found part of the answer in their words, in listening to how they talked about learning.

RESEARCH METHODS and SETTING

When I first set out to research campus residential culture I was not committed to a particular methodology. However, as I delved into the literature I became convinced that qualitative methods were the most appropriate approach to

answering my question. Student culture research (e.g., Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Horowitz, 1987; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991; Moffatt, 1989) following sociological, anthropological, and even historical models of scholarship, suggested that students acquire and tend to maintain socially defined attitudes about academic activity. What, when and how much one should study; what's more or less important than studying; the consequences for deflecting peer demands in order to study -- the literature persuaded me that both students and researchers might hear answers to these questions in the residential culture.

Qualitative terminology and techniques vary among researchers. Van Maanen (1979) said that qualitative research is an "umbrella term for an array of interpretive techniques which seek to ... come to terms with meaning, not frequency..." (p. 520). I chose the case study, a research strategy which "attempts to examine (a) a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when (b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 1981, p. 23). I am following Spradley's (1980) process of "ethnographic analysis" -- "the search for the parts of a culture and their relationships as <u>conceptualized by the informants</u>" (Spradley, 1979, p. 93) -- and relied on his developmental research sequence to provide an initial structure for the process of data collection and analysis.

Qualitative research methodology demands that the human researcher, the only instrument "consistent with the principles

of qualitative research" (Whitt, 1991, p. 408), approach the study question with a minimum of preconceived guesses about what's going on. My design, at first a rough working frame to guide the inquiry, was flexible, adapted to the demands of the data as the study progressed. The developmental research sequence consists of a dozen activities. The "participant observer" enters the developmental research sequence at step one, the selection of a social situation, and completes the study at step twelve, the writing of an ethnography, but she remains otherwise free to move in and out of the middle steps in increasingly focused observations and analysis of the case under study. The process has direction but is not linear.

First, I selected a Social Situation, composed of three primary elements: "a place, actors, and activities" (Spradley, 1980, p. 39). The place was one floor in a six story, vintage 1950's women's residence hall at a comprehensive regional public university with an enrollment of about 13,000 and a campus resident population of about 1,800. A typical long "double-loaded corridor" of 22 identical double rooms, "my floor" contained two community bathrooms, study lounge with kitchenette, trash room, and laundry room. Empty, it appeared but a sterile shell of concrete block walls, linoleum floors and night-is-day fluorescent lighting. The furnishings were functional and sturdy but unattractive and, as a general rule, mismatched. The women who lived here humanized their living space by decorating their doors and rearranging and accenting their rooms with personal furnishings, paint, mementos, crafts,

posters, art work, potpourri, and the myriad other accouterments of college student interior decor.

The actors were the residents of the floor. During the fall semester 43 women were assigned here, including the undergraduate Resident Advisor (RA), who had a room to herself. By the Spring semester the census had dropped to 39. Nine women left by the end of the Fall term, and five new residents moved in during the Spring. Most of the residents on my floor were white, predominantly freshmen and sophomores, with a sprinkling of juniors and seniors. All were in their late teens or early twenties. There were two, then three, foreign students; and three, then two, African American students. More than half were state residents and a dozen shared high school backgrounds with at least one other woman. University statistics indicated that the building was slightly more likely than the campus's five other under-class halls to house white students and higher-income students. Perhaps the most atypical characteristic of the floor's population was that it included eight of the nine members of the women's volleyball team. Over the course of the year I became comfortably acquainted with the majority of the residents.

As a participant observer I approached the social situation with intent to (a) engage in its activities and experience them first-hand, and (b) observe the place, its actors and activities in order to develop an explicit awareness of them. Thus I became a quasi-insider as well as a recorder. Qualitative research is labor intensive research. Although

complete participation -- living in the unit as an undergraduate for full year -- wasn't feasible, I strove to achieve the maximum involvement possible within these parameters:

1. The residents of the unit were informed of my role and intentions initially and throughout the course of the study, both orally and in writing. There was no attempt to deceive them or to go undercover. Letters of consent were obtained where necessary.

2. Between August 1992 and May 1993 I spent, on average, over 10 hours per week on the floor in its common public areas or in individual student rooms, and, upon occasion, in other parts of building. Initially, I made scattershot observations of the residents and their environment, providing tastes of the social situation at different times of day and during different days of the week. Subsequent observations became more "purposeful" as necessary to facilitate understanding and expansion of cultural themes emerging from ongoing analysis of the data collected (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 67).

3. I engaged in informal conversations with residents, individually and in groups, and, whenever possible, participated in group activities with them (floor parties, meetings, outings and so on). Aside from generating fieldnotes, such involvement increased my rapport with the residents.

4. Midway through the observation period, the residence hall closed for the university's winter break. During this

natural hiatus I met with the members of my doctoral committee and summarized and refined the study's progress and direction through "peer debriefing." Whitt (1991) defined peer debriefing as calling on peers or colleagues to help "(a) ensure that the researcher is aware of the influence of personal perspectives and perceptions on the study and (b) develop and test next steps and hypotheses ..." (p. 413).

5. I tape-recorded interviews with 33 of the residents during the Spring term. In accordance with ethnographic research procedures, the questions asked emerged from analysis of my fieldwork and from literature I reviewed. I developed not so much a questionnaire, but a guide which helped create a semi-structured, interactive climate for the interviews. The interviews were conducted over a three-month period. Each lasted from one to two hours.

6. I collected demographic data from the residents, including age; high school attended; other college attendance; high school and college Grade Point Average; college major; place of birth; place of permanent residence; level of educational attainment of parents; parents' occupations; number of siblings; class rank; number of semesters lived in residence halls; and vocational aspiration.

7. To enhance the unobtrusiveness considered crucial to successful participant observation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Spradley, 1980) my rights and responsibilities with regard to the students were no different from the rights and responsibilities enjoyed by them as residents of the unit. In

other words, I managed to arrange matters so that I did not function in the capacity of teacher, rule enforcer or university official, and bore no special responsibility to monitor or report on the residents' activities.

All totalled, I devoted 367 hours to participant observation and interviewing during the 32 weeks the hall was open. "Field sessions" ranged anywhere from ten or fifteen minutes to seven or eight hours in length. Always nearby was my field notebook. I would steal minutes "on site" and write furiously, trying to remember and reconstruct. After a field visit, within the next few hours and even through the next day, I fleshed out my notes and recollections, then typed them. As the year progressed my notes became more focused and I summarized or generalized much of what happened, concentrating on recording events and talk related to my research question. By May I had filled fourteen 80-page college-ruled "Neatbooks" with notes, memos, descriptions, observer commentary and proposed emerging themes.

Data were coded, compared and examined for recurrent terms, incidents, and activities. I listened to how the "girls" -- as they chose to refer to themselves -- talked about what they thought and felt. I watched them interact, interacted with them, and, because I could not be with each girl every minute of every day, I recorded their interpretations of their daily lives. I sought to extract the shared meanings from their words, the shared meanings which generated behavior. My goal was not to "objectively" tally the

phenomena, but to comb the expressed perceptions and understandings for evidence of cultural themes operating in the social situation.

EMERGING THEMES

Through the process of coding and analysis of my notes and observations, emerging themes, explanations of cultural principles embedded in the data, have begun to take shape. At this point all fieldnotes and half the interviews have been reviewed at least twice. This paper highlights just two themes emergent in the residents' conversations about academic activity. To place these themes in context, it's appropriate to share some general descriptions of the features of the floor's cultural landscape:

1. Taken in the aggregate, the floor was a loose culture. Shared goals were hazily defined and cooperation was not essential to achievement of individual goals. Each resident's perception of " the floor" was defined by the norms of her friendship group. On several occasions I thought that girls (I reluctantly refer to these young women as "girls" to reflect their vocabulary -- notwithstanding the affront to my feminist sensibilities) were talking about the floor as a whole when they made statements about "this floor...". I soon learned that they were referring to a much smaller affiliative cluster. When Ruth (all names are pseudonyms) emphasized the importance of Campus Crusade for Christ to "the floor" or Celia regaled me with stories about "everyone" on the floor going out dancing, their inclusive terms embraced only those girls with whom they

interacted or, more particularly, socialized. Some girls ignored the residents who didn't participate in their group; others were intrigued or perturbed by residents who seemed to shun involvement with "the floor" as they perceived it. Altogether I identified at least half a dozen "floors" along a single corridor, depending on who was describing the scene.

2. Loose culture or no, assumptions about friendliness and hallway "etiquette" transcended affiliative groups. For instance, an open door signaled one's willingness to interact with others. The occasionally closed door said "I'm busy now" or "I'm out," but the regularly closed door might be interpreted to mean that a girl was not open to being "part of the floor." As did Moffatt (1989) at Rutgers in the 1980's, I collected strong evidence that the American imperative to be "friendly" was alive and well.

3. An ethic of "caring" transcended the boundaries of the floors within the floor. When her floor functioned satisfactorily for a girl, it served as a haven, a source of emotional support and a refuge from the slings and arrows of academic fortune. As a participant observer I benefited from this function myself and came away from most field sessions feeling refreshed, energized and "stroked." Much of the talking about learning was embedded in expressions of sympathy and encouragement. Helping and caring enjoyed such paramount importance in this culture that girls self-censored their remarks to avoid boring others or, worse, making them "feel bad."

4. Curricular learning was tangential to the shared culture of the floor. Schoolwork was something everyone had to do, a common task and requirement. No one displayed surprise when academic activity proved unpleasant or unrewarding. Motivated to minimize its unpleasantness, they nevertheless accepted academic discomfort with far more equanimity than they tolerated social discomfort. I was inclined to suspect that, cocooned within this nurturing environment and in respite from the baffling rules and policies of the university, a girl might be lulled away from the substance of the curriculum. One evening late in March I wrote,

> Studying on the floor seems to be conducted within a stream of activities: food, phones, friends coming by. The girls seem to accept these interruptions cheerfully, if not downright willingly at times. They fight their tiredness as they study. They talk about what they should be doing and complain about unfairness and difficulty. As we sat in Meg's room with the door ajar it was hard not to be aware of the people outside and on the floor, coming back and forth, talking and laughing. I would think that close and focused concentration would be difficult under those conditions.

Of course, girls <u>did</u> talk about learning and I listened and took note of both the form and substance of that talk. Below, I examine their academic cost-benefit analyses and their taboo against "too much" intellectual discussion. These

represented but two themes of their discourse. Residents also talked about classroom anecdotes unrelated to course content. They talked about professors, a significant but impersonal presence. Indeed, In my notes I labeled professors, the "pronouns without antecedents" because, in telling her friends about the number of pages she had to read, a girl needed to make no reference to her instructor other than to say, "HE never tells us what's going to be on the test." They advised each other about the "good," the "bad," the "hard" and the "easy" professors and agreed, implicitly, that one of the most important things a girl can divine about her teacher is whether or not "she likes me."

Girls talked about their study habits, revealing standards against which they evaluated their own academic activity. From this talk emerged the theme, "What you should be doing and how you should be doing it." I heard claims that students are individually responsible for their academic success or failure. Yet, while most girls explicitly pronounced themselves mistresses of their academic fates, in their day to day exchanges they were just as likely to sound like victims of circumstances and others' (mainly the professors and "the university") failure to care.

All academic talk fell into one or the other of two categories: (1) The functional or practical talk which treated the mechanics and processes of being a student: due dates, materials, numbers of pages required, and so on; and (2) The less often heard substantive talk that treated curricular

subject matter and what one learned: facts, ideas, skills, and interests.

COST-BENEFIT TALK

Most of the "what you should be doing and how you should be doing it" talk lay within the practical domain. In analyzing this talk I discovered a shared sense of personal cost-benefit analysis by which girls set limits on their expenditure of time and energy for academic pursuits. Their stated object was to earn the degree and the grades as efficiently as possible. In their culture it was not savvy to spend any more time or effort than needed to get the grade one wanted. A loosely conceptualized "efficiency principle" emerged from the ways residents talked about three perceived imperatives in their academic lives: managing specific, class-related tasks; managing their academic careers; and the avoidance of waste.

The Efficiency Principle

The general principle behind managing a class was to do the work required (but no more) when it was required (but no earlier). Behavior outside this principle signaled that something was amiss. I witnessed this exchange between Trish, a freshman, and one of her friends:

> I ask Trish how things are going for her? She says, "Boring! ... I have three night classes so I have nothing to do all day Thursday and nothing to do all day Tuesday." I ask, "what have you been doing then?" Tapping a speech book she's holding, she

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says, "I'm three chapters ahead in this and three chapters ahead in history." Her friend laughs slightly and says, "you MUST be bored!"

Girls stressed the importance of getting good value, usually meaning a good grade or usable credit, for the time and effort invested in a class. It annoyed them when, as Ivy, a sophomore, once complained,

> You work so hard and, say you get a 89% and someone gets an 80% and you both get B's. That drives me crazy cause it seems so unfair."

Nora, likewise, resented doing "busy work" that didn't count toward her grade.

On a grander scale, the girls sought to obtain their degrees and an optimum grade point average as efficiently as possible. Celia, a freshman who said she wanted to "make the best grades I can," promised that she would not take any classes she didn't need for her degree:

> "My goals are more," she explained, "to make the best grades. That's just your education. Education is my goal. I want to become the best teacher, best experienced that I can be. I'm paying for it, I want everything or more that I can get."

Janet, another freshman, said she'd heard that "you could take classes just for credit" in your first year but after that you'd better buckle down and "go for the knowledge and learn what you're studying." Tammy was not alone in feeling compelled to calculate the most effective ratio of time spent

on academics to time devoted to paying for school:

> I have to watch that I don't work too much and that work doesn't interfere with my academics. In some cases it does. I like to stay prepared for a test, to make fairly decent grades. I have to make time for myself to study and all that stuff.

The efficiency principle was most forcefully expressed in terms of what occurred when one failed to apply it correctly: waste. Waste was vocally deplored in the culture of this floor. Sonya, a freshman, calculated ease against cost and chose an academically challenging route to avoid waste:

> I think it'd be wasteful to me if I took all these easy classes, just to get up my GPA, that I didn't need. Because I'd be here an extra semester and I want to get out of here as fast as I can. So I'm gonna take classes I need, rather than taking a whole semester of something I don't need. It think that'd be a waste of money and time. But I know people that, first semester they got bad grades and they want to get their GPA up so they took just, all, easy classes to do that. But I just think it'd be a waste of time.

Celia, in our interview, revealed a similar mindset:

> Celia: ... I know what I want to take. So therefore, the classes, I'm going to take what I need. But I'm not going to take something I don't need, that's a waste. These people who don't know

what they're going to major in, they may take something. But when they decide what they want to [major in], they didn't need it. So they wasted those 6 hours of that science they didn't need. That's the money of waste. That's a big disadvantage, especially if you're the one that's paying for it.

Me: Some people might say "well, but, you've learned something", it has intrinsic value.

Celia: Now that's the thing, but a lot of students have to pay for what they're doing. I've seen cases where people had to drop out because they just didn't have the money because they've spent 12 hours on a subject that they didn't need - when they find out what they want to do.

Girls deplored classes that wasted their time and effort. Lucy, Sonya's roommate (also a freshman) said,

> What really makes me upset is, you study something so much and it's not even on the test at all. Or, you know something by heart and they put something else on the test. You never know what to expect.

Trish found that

> A lot of times I'm saying "it's just wasted energy! I'm never going to use this --- except on the test. ... Especially because in math class she's teaching us how to add and subtract and I'm like,

"this is a waste of your time lady. All of us know how to add and subtract."

The residents spoke as if it were shameful to waste money, especially when that money came from one's parents or when the waste resulted from the student's inefficiency. Helen was consistently aghast at other students' profligacy:

> It really upsets me to see someone wasting, or their mom and dad wasting money for them to come to college and then they don't do anything. They don't do a thing. And, if they do, it's because it's the end of the semester and they're failing the class and they know that if they don't pass the final, they're gonna get an F.

Cindy, a freshman, was distressed by her own failure to make cost effective choices:

> This first semester I had NO idea and I just took general courses. But then I feel like I wasted [my parents'] money and my time because I had no idea what I was doing. Because none of those classes --- they just go as electives!

Ivy, on the other hand, was relieved to be on volleyball scholarship, working for her tuition herself, because in her mind she was beholden to no one -- even if this meant attending college far from home and suffering homesickness:

> If I was home my parents would pay for it and I would have the pressure of - I would feel like I owe them at least good grades because they're paying for it.

Beyond the mere motive to avoid waste, Bunny, a new international student, sought the best value for her family's dollars. She attributed her choice of major to a desire to give her mother her money's worth. During our interview Bunny said that she thought she might enjoy being an education major:

Me: Why don't you major in that, then?

Bunny: No way!

Me: Why not?

Bunny: Cause I can't make money off the teacher. You know how little they pay for the teacher. And I --- my mom pay for my college, so why would she expect me to be a teacher? Its like so expensive for college here, for me, cause it's ten thousand a year.

Me: That's a lot!

Bunny: Why would I want to be a teacher that get paid only like --- how much? I don't know.

The girls internalized the notion of finding the right "formula" for success -- although no one ever called it a formula. They talked about this fairly regularly when planning their schedules and, especially, as Helen forecasted, near term's end when faced with exams and deadlines. They advised each other about the best ways to make the efficiency principle work. As I listened to their advice I discovered two important recurring "variables" in the formula applied to planning one's academic progress: the quality of one's professors, and the usefulness of what is learned.

Professors were expected to help define the amount of

effort needed to achieve desired results in one's classes. The literature on collegiate cultures is replete with examples of how, over the years, students have regarded professors as cogs in the grade-making machine (see, for instance, Becker, Geer & Hughes, 1968.) This "heritage" was evident among the residents of the floor. Nora told me that one girl might advise another

> Don't take so-and-so for Geology because you'll spend hours and hours a week just to get a C, where you can take so-and-so and spend the same amount of hours and get an A.

Ivy went so far as to define the "bad teacher" as someone who gave meager rewards for the student's effort:

> The bad teacher is someone that expects like almost too much and you -- I mean, you could probably get the same grade, but you have to work so much harder for it and you might not even learn as much as you would having a good teacher.

Louise assured me that the teacher was a primary factor in deciding how much effort the student applied to a class:

> You'll decide how much effort you're gonna put in the class depending how hard the teacher's gonna grade. If the teacher's gonna be really really lenient then you know you're gonna set that class aside and do things where the teacher is gonna be real hard. ... You pretty much do work around what the teacher wants.

Learning, in addition to -- but rarely in lieu of --

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grades and credits, served as a measure of the value of the return for one's time, money, and effort -- especially if what was learned was considered "useful." Tammy, an aspiring medical technologist, said that she might sacrifice ease for learning,

> If it's something that I really need to learn about to know about, because I'm gonna have it in the future, I'm gonna have to deal with it, I would rather take the more difficult professor that you actually really learn from.

Cindy, who had "wasted" her time and her parents money on an economics class she "didn't need," was more sanguine about her fine arts class because she'd learned something she could use:

> I Like art and music and all that appreciation stuff. I didn't really need that, but I took it because I'm interested in that. .... I guess I could really use my fine arts class when I go to museums. I could use that towards something. In economics, I can't pull out a chart and say "this is the spike and this is the mean curve." So I can use it in real life. And some of my classes I'll never use, just, you know, this year.

What determined the usefulness of a class was left to the girls' discretion. I never heard anyone ponder why someone else might have thought they needed a course, or why it was required in their curriculum.

Efficiency in Practice

On a daily basis, the efficiency principle informed the residents' discussions and remarks about academic activity and provided them with cues about what to do and how to feel about the outcomes of their choices. The efficiency principle focused on quantities -- dollars, credits, hours earned, grade points -- as, we must be admit, does any university catalog. When the girls spoke of academic activity they were much less likely to talk about the content and quality of their learning than to talk about how much they had done. Trish fussed about having to learn "100 definitions for tomorrow" while Helen illustrated the difficulty of her teacher education course by hefting a three-inch stack of reference materials compiled by a previous student of the class. "And he only got a C+," Helen lamented. Kathleen usually defined her daily requirements in numbers of pages to be read. Moreover, when various girls asked me about my research project, they invariably wanted to know "when is it due?" and "how long does it have to be." They seldom asked about content.

Again and again the girls deplored waste. To waste time or effort or money made them feel bad: embarrassed or foolish. When a girl believed that she had failed to employ the most efficient formula for success in a class, she was ashamed. Nora, graduating senior art major, wrestled all Fall semester with her geography class, figuring "I had a B in there no matter what." On December 10 Nora, smacking her forehead with the heel of her hand, berated herself for having attended class

when she didn't need to:

> The lady doesn't take roll and most of the people don't go to class. It took ME all semester to catch on.

Three days later, the day before the geography final, Nora again berated herself; this time, for not going to class:

> Y'know, I figured up my grade in the course and I had an A! If I'd known that I could have been studying all week for the final. But I though I was getting a B anyway so I just blew it off and waited till the last minute.

A couple of months later during our interview Nora continued to deplore her wasteful failure to improperly asses the variables in the efficiency formula:

> And that was an easy class too. That was not a time-consuming class. That was read the chapter, go to listen to the lectures, take notes. ... And it wasn't an enormous amount of stuff, it was just I didn't have a good sense of where I was grade-wise in there. ... I really thought I had a B in there no matter what. And, so she doesn't take roll and so I just --- I missed like the last three classes or something before the exam. Which is a good portion of the exam because we had had a test only three weeks before. Now I'm embarrassed cause that was quite a miscalculation from that time!

Girls looked to their peers for cues about the "right"

values to plug into the formula. Even though she received an A in her class, Helen felt upset and resentful that others might be getting A's with less effort. She suffered a serious blow to her self esteem:

> You know, everybody says, "oh, you're smart." No, I'm not smart. I just study an awful lot. I think it's nice for people to praise you and say, "oh you're smart," but it kind of makes me mad because I know that other people can only take an hour to learn something, where it takes me four or five hours. ... I was studying for a final. ... The first class I had gotten a hundred on the first test. Well, it took me 7 hours to study for that test. It wasn't that much material. The second, the final, I studied probably 5 hours and I felt really bad about that because I still felt like I didn't know the information. But then you know we'd get the test back and I've gotten a 93 or so on it. And I ended up getting an A in the class. But then, this girl beside me, you know, says, "I can't believe I got a 95 on that test. I mean, I only studied two hours." You know, she's really smart. I just think, "gosh, Helen, you have to be dumb not to grasp any of this material." It takes me so long. I left and tears were streaming down my face. ... It's very discouraging when it takes you longer.

These students believed that hard work -- not performance,

mind you, but hard work -- should be equitably rewarded. When a professor failed to disclose information they deemed essential to calculating the most economical path to curricular success, they became angry. Sonya, for instance, resented having studied hard for what turned out to be an "optional" final:

> Last semester I had a Sociology class and I had an A in the class. That was the first final I had, and I studied because I had to get an A on the final to keep my A. And I went in there and I didn't have to end up taking the final! And I studied all that time! I was kinda mad! I was kinda happy, but I was kinda mad. Cause I didn't know how I could do on it. I wanted to keep my grade up but -- I wish she would've told us.

When, at the floor Christmas party, Sonya told other residents about the waste of "all that time studying," she elicited nods of recognition murmurs of sympathy. In a similar vein, Kathleen was "mad because I read the whole book, I didn't skip any pages," only to find herself tested on "just the first chapter."

Their sense of the value of their efforts inspired girls to criticize professors who did not, in their estimation, fairly compensate them for their troubles. Lucy fumed because,

> You work so hard and you only get this amount of points. I did a hundred note cards and got a check[mark] for 'em. ... And I was just so furious.

> I was, like, "I did all that work for a check!" Well, I got a check plus. You could get a check-minus, a check, or a check-plus. But you just feel like you want him to put a hundred over a hundred or you know, something -- fifty over fifty, instead of check. And I think a lot of people in my class were really upset that we did all that work for a lousy old check.

I recorded this field note about Tammy, typing away in the study lounge:

> Tammy announces, "I got one page done." "Good," I say and I sit down to write at the other table. I ask Tammy how many pages she's aiming for? She says "it's not how many pages it's just whatever it takes to get it done." She goes on about writing up "two cases" for these papers and says something like "it's funny, all this work for only 10 points," adding that what she's doing is just "turning out long."

Another night, Meg, a sophomore transfer student, informed those of us gathered to "study" in her room that she was writing a short paper on a movie about Noam Chomsky that had been shown on campus earlier that evening. When Meg went to the movie and found out that it would be three hours long, she grabbed some handouts and left, skipping the movie. She said she "couldn't see hanging around for three hours for just a one-page paper." After all, she reasoned, all she had to do was "just enough to prove that I was there." Clearly, in this

instance Meg's interpretation of the efficiency principle dictated that the important goal was the accumulation of points and credits, not learning. I knew that professors frequently required students to write brief papers or fill out note cards as motivation and verification for partaking of valuable "learning experiences." I wondered if professors understood that their students might devalue and disdain those experiences simply because they received too few "points" for completing them?

Although Nora pooh-poohed "busy work," many girls said they would willingly do mundane tasks if they would gain points to boost their grades. Lucy felt it was important to be rewarded for her time:

> I like to get, like, homework, because they give you points for doing homework and -- I think teachers are here, pretty -- most of them give stuff to do but a lot of them just make you read and you don't get anything out of that.

Occasionally I forgot that point accumulation, not learning, was the objective. During an interview, freshman Louise remarked that "more homework" would help her "do better" in college. I pursued the notion of homework being helpful, assuming that Louise meant it would enhance her learning. She set me straight:

> I never had to study in high school. I was the type of person that could sit in class and listen and do the homework and the take the test. You know, "if

> I get a C on the test, fine, I'm getting an A on the homework, that means I'm getting a B in the class." That's how I got through my first year of Algebra in high school. I didn't know how to do it so I was copying off somebody who'd had the class before and they were making straight A's on homework so I was making straight A's on homework and failing the tests and I was making a C in the class. I think that's how homework helps out. Cause you can get good grades on homework and that helps out on the tests and stuff that you miss out on.

As indicated above, the girls devoted a fair amount of their academic discourse to "decoding" professors for clues about just how much to study. Nora praised her biology teacher because

> He came into class and he said, "if you read the chapter ahead of time and then you listen to my lecture and you take good notes on my lecture, you'll notice that there are aspects of these chapters that I leave out and you'll know what you do not have to waste your time studying for the test on, because I will test you on what I lecture and whatever I lecture about that is in the book." So, that's a good teacher because it's organized and you know what to study. And he's not boring.

Liz described the process of assessing a professor to determine how much work she'd have to do in a class:

> You can kinda tell during class just by the teacher --- what their attitude is, if they're gonna be a really hard-core person who's like, [lowers voice] "I'm gonna have 10 hundred multiple choice questions and there's gonna be one word difference on all of them." You just kinda get a feel just by being in class. If the instructor's laid back or whatever, if there's a lot of group interaction so you can kind of get to know the professor and he can kind of get to know you, then you usually figure that you're gonna do better in that class -- I do anyway -- than if I have a teacher who just sits up there and just lectures and says "this is the way it is, this is the way it is." And I usually feel that teacher's gonna be harder cause they don't really care about interacting with the students, they're just teaching that class for whatever purpose. And they're not really concerned with what the student actually picks up and learns. It just kind of, "if you learn it, you learn it , if you don't you don't; you're gonna fail my class." I just kinda go by the feel of how the teachers are and just how the class is set up: if it's lecture or if you have discussions or whatever. And then you can kind of tell which one's gonna be harder or which one's gonna be easier

> or which professor's gonna be more lenient with the grade or maybe even scale it or something. Or give you a chance to make it up somehow.

In daily conversation efficiency-principle talk intimated the girls' parsimonious application of time and energy to academic activity. Tammy, for instance, parceled out her limited time with attention to two variables: the grade she wanted and the relative importance of the classes to her career goal:

> You take into consideration what grade you want --- and I weight mine as to which one's most important to me. Which one is the hardest and will require more time. The most important class that I have right now is hematology. That's my major. That's what I'm gonna be doing for the rest of my life and how well I know it will affect somebody's life someday. That's a heckuva lot more important to me than writing an English paper, you know. Or even worrying about the momentum of those gliders in physics class. Because that's gonna affect me and affect somebody else in the future.

Early in the semester, Liz weighed the demands of her classes and estimated the effort she would expend on each:

> OK, I have a science class and I've heard it's not a really hard class, you know, it's just lecture and tests and everything. It's real interesting and stuff but it's not gonna be like my social studies or

> my geography tests. For that one, for me anyway, I put less into that class because I know it will take me less to get an A, so I can put more into another class that I know is gonna be harder, that I have to work harder in. ... Or, if you have two tests the next day it's just kinda like, which one can you get by with not studying for as much so that you can get just as good a grade on it.

The residents were constantly trying to work out the most efficient, low-stress strategies for achieving acceptable grades. Bernadette, a volleyball player, debated whether to "start out bad" so she could reap the rewards for improving her performance. Several of us were in her room, talking and studying, when she told us,

> "I am writing an English paper that our English teacher is going to base all our others on. I can't decide whether to write it really well or just go through the motions." I ask, "do you mean the grade on the first paper will be the standard for all the other grades?" She says, yes, and that she's not sure if it'd be a good idea to make the first paper "too good."

There is no debate about whether this strategy of artificially lowering one's performance level will help Bernadette become a better writer.

Girls frequently tied their levels of commitment to the grade they believed it possible to attain. Nora decided not to

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waste time reaching for the unreachable in French class:

> If I knew that, like, I had a high B but I was gonna have to get a 95 or a 98 on the exam to get an A, I didn't even study, because I knew I had a B. I mean, I could get down in the 60's and still get a B! That always happened to me in French and I never made anything over a 92; that was the highest grade I ever made in all four semesters of French. So, you know, you can chuck the A and spend your time somewhere else; don't spend your time studying French if you're gonna get a B anyway.

On the other hand, Nora was quite dedicated to her painting classes. Because she "knew" she could count on A's in painting and so was unburdened by "worry," she felt free to concentrate on the artwork itself.

Efficiency calculations reached their peaks during exam periods as girls' "resources" ran out and academic demands competed for their attention. During winter finals Kathleen told me that she did "OK" on her biology test and got an A in the class. I asked if she had more finals and she replied that she had two more to go, one in math. But, she said, "I'm not bothering to study [math] cause I only need 40% to get an A. There's no way I'll do that bad." Later, in April, Alexa, a nursing major who enjoyed a reputation as perhaps the most studious member of the volleyball team, performed similar calculations. I encountered her in the study lounge and asked her how her classes were going. She said, "they're all pretty

good except chemistry. I need a C in there and I have a D/C. But there are two more tests and a final so I think I can do OK. And we get to drop the lowest grade."

Lest I become overly fearful that, in and of itself, this "mercenary" approach to academic activity was deleterious to learning, an economist reminded me that all human beings are economic beings. We perform mini cost-benefit studies every time we make choices about our lives (Harlan Smith, III, Ph.D., Personal Communication, November 10, 1994). What matters are the values we assign to our options. To gain insight into the residents' values and beliefs about learning, I listened to and analyzed their discourse on curricular content.

CURRICULAR CONTENT TABOOS

Practical talk tended to eclipse "substantive" talk about academic activity. As Ivy said during the second semester when reminded that my study focused on learning and academic activity, "That's interesting, because it seems like that's one of the least things you hear about in the dorm." The girls' substantive talk was constrained by their shared understanding of acceptable limits for the content and duration of academic discourse. This "understanding" amounted to a cultural taboo against deep or extensive talk about what one was learning in the classroom. I found that when asked if they talked about "classes" or "academics" the residents' affirmative answers lay in the practical domain of grades and anecdotes and emotional support. Girls who said they "learned" from others on the floor, usually meant that they had received factual information

and/or practical tips for academic success.

I reworded my question and asked the girls if they got involved in "intellectual conversations" about course content. Yes, they said, "we talk about religion and politics and current events." According to Andrea,

> Oh, we talk about academic stuff! You know, most people always think, "well, you were just sitting there talking about guys and everything." And that's really not what -- we do our share of that, but we also do our share of talking about what career do we want to go into [and] ... stuff like AIDS and abortion --- child abuse, stuff like that.

Nora, the Resident Advisor, told me in November that there were "a lot" of conversations about the presidential elections and lot about religion. "They get pretty philosophical," she said of her residents. Rhonda, another freshman, offered what I came to realize was a minority view:

> We talk about academics, Christ, everything that's going on; we talk about guys or problems with them. ... everybody, I believe, on this floor is strongly opinionated. We talk about what we think the future's gonna hold for our country.

Sonya, a shy and diligent honors student, said she talked about academics to her three close friends on the floor, but added that they didn't "talk about anything in depth." She told me that she "didn't hear much about" intellectual discussions and that people mostly talked about where they were "going out"

socially. Sonya compulsively apologized, "that's awful, but it's true." Barbara, a junior who lived just across the hall from Sonya, said of intellectual discussions, "we do it every once in a while but not a lot. I like it. ... We talk about differences in culture and our religions." However, she told me,

> I think a lot of people just talk about relationships and things that happen during the day and in class and relationships they'd like to have -- their ideal relationship."

Several of the girls cited television as the occasion for discussion about issues and events.

Given my research question, I was hyper-alert to discourse that stemmed from curricular learning. I didn't hear much. I noted brief bursts of sharing about "what I heard" or "what we did" in class, especially if the topic was perceived as unique or connected to personal interests. For instance, one evening while several of us were sitting and talking in Nora's room, Ruth, a sophomore education major, came in to show us her most recent art education projects: a woven paper bag, a yarn purse, and some Ukranian-style decorated eggs. Nora, the artist, asked a few questions about the technique for decorating the eggs before the conversation drifted to other topics.

On another occasion, the study lounge was the venue for sharing interesting facts drawn from a textbook: Celia, an outgoing freshman, invited the other girls in the lounge to look at pictures of genetic abnormalities in children. "It'd

be neat to study just to study but not when you have a test in two days and don't know the material," she said, and launched our small group into a ten minute discussion about retardation, child abuse, and mainstreaming. Kathleen, a volleyball player with a reputation for being "smart," enjoyed discussing physiology and biology with anyone who showed interest. She believed that "people who talk about their classes are the ones who do better." Senior Maggie admitted that she might discuss course content with others on the floor, "if I get really excited about something, like this Broadcasting assignment!"

Celia and Rhonda were perhaps the most prolific discussers of course content on the floor. Celia explained:

> Rhonda and I have four classes together and we'll get started on something and -- like, in discussion classes (my EDF and everything) we like, get INVOLVED. It's not just something you do in a class, it's something that you look at every day and you just keep talking. And we can come back and talk for hours. Like our Spanish and our French. We'll get together and we'll just talk to each other and not know anything we're saying. That's an educational process right there. We're learning and we're using things, but we're goofing around at the same time. I think that helps us.

Living-learning proponents heartened by Celia's enthusiasm must remember that hers was a virtually idiosyncratic comment. Nora, an accomplished painter, seldom spoke about her art.

Most girls who knew Carla as a friendly, informal social leader had little notion of her deep interest in music. Discounting conversations (usually brief) incited by the participant observer's prompting and questions, curricular content discussions were indeed scarce in this culture.

How, then, in the daily lives of the residents, was such discussion constrained? It's difficult to locate examples of the taboo in my data because, of course, taboo behavior is conspicuous by its absence. Nevertheless, in all friendship groups and from individuals, too, I collected evidence of their shared sense that topics drawn from the curriculum bore a stigma and must be handled with delicacy and finesse. If a girl became too wrapped up in her subject, another might deflect the conversation to safer terrain. I spent some time one evening in Carla and Rhonda's room along with Kathleen and a couple of other residents. Kathleen began holding forth on a book she'd been reading for class, Tropical Moist Forests. I wrote in my notebook:

> For five to eight minutes she tells many facts about the rain forests and what's going on in South American countries. She talks about Indians, about gold mining and farming and how the two affect each other, and about villagers and violence and politics. Rhonda is watching Kathleen as she's talking. It is my impression that Rhonda's listening, interested. I'm thinking maybe we'll have an intellectual discussion. Finally, Rhonda asks a question of

> Kathleen: "Will you go back to [your home country -- Kathleen grew up in South America] after you graduate or will you stay here?" Kathleen says something about having to decide and talks about her green card and the rules governing it, about homesickness for her country and family and about citizenship.

Rhonda's question effectively invoked the taboo and steered the conversation back to the interpersonal, immediate social dimension of life on the floor.

Even when it was "okay" to be talking about academics, when, in fact, the girls believed they should be talking about learning, personal and social subjects held sway. I encountered Meg and Andrea studying together in Meg's room. Meg greeted me, smiling and saying "we're talking about guys." "Yeah," seconded Andrea, "we're supposed to be studying." "We're supposed to be talking about European civilization," Meg explained. This was March, six months into the study, and I too had become enculturated. Did I ask their opinions about European civilization? No. I asked if they were talking about "guys in particular or guys in general?"

A number of the girls knew only that, as Sonya said,

> You just don't really talk about it. I don't know why. Other than 'good teacher, bad teacher,' or 'gotta go to class' or, you know, how you did.

However, two of the juniors described the taboo in action. In the midst of a long conversation with Liz about her life and loves she disclosed her interest in books. I wrote in my field

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notebook,

> Liz tells me that she reads a lot in the summer, she just can't read while going to school. I ask about the kinds of books she likes to read and one thing she tells me is that "The Fountainhead" made a big impact on her. At one point in our conversation Liz says she likes to think about "profound and weird" things and when she tries to talk about them "everybody looks at me like I'm crazy."

Sally, an avid political science major told me in our interview,

> Sally: Every time I mention my major here everybody goes "unngh" [sound accompanied by a kind of grimace]. You know.
>
> Me: How does that make you feel?
>
> Sally: I don't know. It really doesn't bother me. I'm like, "well, I enjoy it." It doesn't bother me that they don't like it for whatever. ... I like it so I'm not really worried about it. I just don't talk to them much about my classes and things because they don't seem to understand what I'm talking about anyway. Or don't want to.
>
> Me: Have you ever tried or mentioned something?
>
> Sally: Not really. Not after I found out their attitude toward political science. I didn't really much bring it up.

Even an astute freshmen, like Kathleen, knew that "if you go to

a room, everybody's talking, OK? And you start talking about academics you're gonna be like a nerd." As far as I could tell, Liz and Sally and Kathleen accepted these constraints with equanimity, and happily limited their conversations to matters of more general interest.

To deconstruct the taboo I asked questions which I hoped would generate explanations of why and how conversational certain topics were selected for discussion. I learned that two features of the culture, etiquette and caring, constrained the girls' talk.

The first, an etiquette bred from the desire to be seen as friendly (see Moffatt, 1989), told girls that it was simply impolite to try to engage another girl in conversation outside her area of interest. Kathleen told me in our interview that she liked talking about "my anatomy and stuff":

> Kathleen: But sometimes I feel like it doesn't fit in the conversation.
>
> Me: Really? What makes you think that?
>
> Kathleen: Because people look at you with big eyes. They're like, "who cares about anatomy." I mean, it's something I enjoy, but if somebody comes and talks to me about psychology --- I don't know, something that I don't care --- I don't care about listening to that. So I understand. If it's something that interests me, I will hear it and talk about it, but if not --- in fact I wouldn't like to be in a conversation when somebody comes and talks

> about the colonial period in the United States. Like I had in that class. I would leave the room so fast that you would not -- I don't know. I bet that's the way a lot of people feel about anatomy so that's why they're like that.

Jane, a freshman, said, "I mean you can talk about your classes but its just boring for other people..... cause I don't like caring about other people's stuff. I think it's boring." Earlier in the year Barbara, Jane's roommate, had shed light on a point of conversational etiquette:

> Since nobody has my major I usually just talk about things I've learned in class that are interesting. They might tell me about things they've learned. We compare how hard are assignments are.

Although Holland and Eisenhart (1990) suggested that women students seldom discussed each others' academic interests because these were regarded as personal and private issues, the women on this floor seemed more concerned about committing the social faux pas of boring someone. "Safe" conversational topics treated "guys," relationships, and the mechanics of academic survival. It was far more socially acceptable to engage in practical talk about academic tasks than to talk about what one was learning.

The second consideration operant in the taboo arose from a transcendent ethic of care. Substantive academic talk was avoided because it might challenge another girl or make her feel bad if it revealed that one was more knowledgeable than

she about a subject. Furthermore, the enforcement of the taboo insured that the floor could function as a haven and refuge from the unpleasantness of academic work. Ivy recalled balking at her mom's attempts to engage her in substantive conversations over the phone:

> Like, after studying all day and then I talk to her at night, I'm like "I just don't feel like thinking any more!" or, like, giving my opinion, I'm kinda like "I don't care, you know!" I mean, I liked it. I like to talk about things like that. But when you have been studying all day or .... when people talk about relationships it's kinda like a release, I guess. Just to get your mind off of academics.

Girls placed the comfort and well being of others above their own interests. Sally's willingness to suppress her affinity for political science, for example illustrated the woman student's abiding conviction that the well-being of others and the harmony of the group may demand that she sacrifice her desires (Gilligan, 1982).

A few residents proposed that the "taboo" was a function of the age and maturity of the residents. Tammy, wise-for-her-years, mused, "I think the older people get the more motivated they are to talk about things like that." Others echoed research which asserted that late-adolescent, early-stage learners are deeply immersed in the demands of their social/peer culture and are not cognitively ready to engage in intellectual discourse beyond the sharing of received facts and

unmoderated opinions (e.g. Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Chickering, 1969; Belenky et al, 1986). Liz explained how talk about curricular topics was pretty remote from most girls' lives:

> I'd say probably, for the most part, we talk about just the social life, what's going on in our lives or whatever. Or, "guess who I saw today when I was walking down the street?" We do that a lot. It's not that the other's totally excluded or anything, it's just that if something particularly interesting happens in class or something we'll just bring it up. But it's just like the major and everything is something that you're working towards but it's way off there, that's not like right now. Even though you are in the classes for that, it's still like, well, when I graduate that'll be it. But, like, right now: "when I went to lunch I saw this person" and all this stuff. You just talk about your day and what happened then.

The taboo was circumstantial. It permitted talking about learning under certain conditions. Girls could talk about learning when they shared classes or majors. Substantive talk then became the more acceptable practical talk which helped one to achieve grades and credits. Celia and Rhonda, as we have heard, reported that talking about the classes they shared helped them learn and therefore, make better grades.

Girls could talk about learning if the caring context were not breached; with, say, a boyfriend, a roommate, a close

friend. Andrea explained in our interview:

> I guess for me it depends on, if I'm really comfortable with the person I'll talk about it. If I don't really know the person, I don't get into in-depth conversations with them.

Irene, a freshman, acknowledged the occasional "intellectual" talk with her roommate Donna:

> Irene: Most of the time we just goof off with each other, but I guess we get in a serious mood and we'll talk about terms we learned in class, or something we read somewhere or something. Talk about it back and forth and express our views on it.
>
> Me: Do you enjoy that?
>
> Irene: Yeah, it's Okay. It's a break from being goofy all the time.

CONCLUSION

Students of collegiate cultures will no doubt comment that many of the findings in this study could have been predicted from available research. The norms and patterns operating on the residential floor described herein did not emerge in a vacuum. Yet this study, rich in detail, aims to provide an intimate look at how those norms and patterns were perpetuated and challenged among a certain group of female students in the 1990's. Settings and contexts to which the study's findings may be applicable cannot be pinpointed. The transferability of the conclusions will be assessed from the perspective of the literature and, ultimately, evaluated by the readers of the

completed dissertation (Whitt, 1991).

Nevertheless, in light of the emergent themes explicated above, the participant observer may be permitted a few preliminary observations and recommendations:

1. Is this a "living-learning" situation? Certainly not in the form living-learning proponents have envisioned. Other than the presence of a so-called "study lounge," little in the environment encourages academic activity or talking about learning. Residence hall managers who seek to promote living-learning among women students should look for ways to integrate curricular learning into the non-threatening, non-evaluative climate women value in their co-curricular spaces. (see Baxter-Magolda, 1993; and Belenky et. al., 1986, for salient recommendations).

2. The women's cost-benefit talk should provoke discussion of effective methods for grading students and awarding credits. If grades must be assigned, numeric percentages rather than letter grades might feel fairer to these students and provide them with a wider yet more precise range of incentives. Otherwise, capstone experiences, "portfolio" approaches, and non-punitive evaluative systems could alleviate the pressure to calculate, freeing students to take intellectual risks.

3. The taboo against talking too much about what you're learning often sounds like plain, old "common sense" politeness. A residence hall is a social situation and in a social situation one does not bring up uninteresting topics for

conversation. Through modeling by staff and older students, and programming which encourages sharing about learning, residents should be given permission to break the taboo.

4. The circumstances under which the taboo is lifted lend support to the efficacy of like-major residential units.

5. Women residents value their living environment when it serves as a refuge and a haven from academic pressures and tasks. If they are to be persuaded to participate in living-learning programs, they must be persuaded that the life of the mind can be extended beyond the drudgery of "making the grade" and compiling credits.

6. The findings challenge professors to develop strategies for motivating students to learn and delve into the material while providing clear and consistent evaluative systems that do not become ends in themselves.

In summary, it is hoped that this case study will deepen and expand the knowledge gained from impact studies and statistical analyses by revealing how students themselves see and make sense of their living environments and by describing the student experience in students' voices.

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